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5-19-2000

# Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee Pronouncer Collecting Words, Finding Pleasure in Event After 20 Years

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"Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee Pronouncer Collecting Words, Finding Pleasure in Event After 20 Years" (2000). *News Releases*. 9056.

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May 19, 2000  
Contact: Jim Pickering  
pickering@udayton.edu

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## NEWS RELEASE

### SCRIPPS HOWARD NATIONAL SPELLING BEE PRONOUNCER COLLECTING WORDS, FINDING PLEASURE IN EVENT AFTER 20 YEARS

DAYTON, Ohio — Alex Cameron doesn't seem the type who'd relish being compared to a child's stuffed animal. Unless, perhaps, that likeness is seen through the eyes of a nervous 11-year-old toiling through "z-y-g-a-p-o-p-h-y-s-e-a-l."

On one hand, the University of Dayton English professor is known to his students as an earnest teacher who early on instills in them a "sense of what they have to do" in his class, he says pointedly.

On the other, when quizzing a young contestant, the bookish, bespectacled pronouncer for the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee assumes a less-professorial posture, one of avuncular ally in the battle of letters, syllables and words.

Many contestants, some as young as 9, are intimidated by the attention drawn to the popular event — which includes live national television, says Mary Brooks, a senior judge for the bee. It's essential to the success of the event that its "ringmaster" be empathetic to the mostly pre-pubescent competitors.

"The media exposure is pretty intense and can frighten many contestants," she says. "Dr. Cameron has a way of easing their anxieties. I've heard him tell contestants that 'I'm your friend — not your enemy. Your enemy is the dictionary.'"

"He never comes across as authoritative or as an opponent to contestants," says Brooks, a Des Moines, Iowa, junior high teacher. "He's just a big teddy bear. The spellers find him a solace in a very tense environment."

Ned Andrews, a staffer this year with the bee and its 1994 national champion, recalls his moment on the stage with Cameron. "The bee is what each individual makes of it," says the Yale University sophomore from Oliver Springs, Tenn. "But I did get a sense that Dr. Cameron was there for me. He had a polite and calming way about him. He made a tense moment less tense."

When Cameron takes the stage at this year's bee (May 31-June 1), it will mark his 20th

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OFFICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS  
300 College Park Dayton, Ohio 45469-1679  
(937) 229-3241 (937) 229-3063 Fax  
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consecutive year as pronouncer. He also will be fresh from a pre-bee ritual, a two-week vacation at the family summer house in Michigan.

"I head there to get away from the world and go through the words," he explains. "I practice pronouncing them. I look for errors. I do a lot of walking and talking to myself. People must wonder."

This year marks the 73rd year for the bee, the country's longest-running educational competition. Nearly 250 contestants from all 50 states, Europe, Guam, Mexico, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Bahamas and American Samoa will travel to the nation's capital to compete for the top prize of \$10,000 and bragging rights. ESPN will air the bee finals live from 1 to 3:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 1.

In 1978 Cameron "tagged along" with then-pronouncer and UD colleague, the late Richard Baker. When Baker retired from the bee in '79, event officials asked Cameron to take over. Two decades, hundreds of thousands of multi-syllabic words and countless spellers later, he's still enunciating in perfect cadence to such words as "equamulose" and "vivisepulture."

"It's a pleasure to be a part of the bee," says Cameron, who chairs UD's English department. "I've always worked with languages and have a great love for words. I began reading the dictionary in the third grade, and I've never stopped."

He adds that his UD colleagues will challenge him with what they feel are arcane words. "More often than not, I can reply, 'Oh, everyone knows that word.' I've been doing this for so long there are few words I don't recognize. Every now and then I'll come across one that baffles me."

Cameron's greatest joy, however, comes from the young contestants themselves, most of whom are between 11 and 13. "It's refreshing to work with younger students than the college students I'm used to working with. They're all bright and competitive — and have adrenaline they've never used before."

Recalling the changes he's witnessed over his span as pronouncer, Cameron says one of the biggest differences is the way today's spellers prepare for the event. Mostly gone, he says, are the days when spellers sat at the kitchen table and were incessantly drilled by a parent.

"Contestants today rely a great deal on the technology of the day," he says. "They still use the yellow (contest preparation) book, but they augment their preparation with audio tapes, the Internet and, in some cases, professional spelling bee tutors. It's a more sophisticated approach that 20 years ago."

Cameron adds that there remains one constant in every bee — the "great teacher" that is failure.

"Most of these spellers are so bright that they've never failed in public," he says. "One

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of the most valuable lessons of the bee is that you get this crushing moment — when you've misspelled a word and have to walk off the stage. Then your family pats you on the back and you realize that failure doesn't mean the end of the world. They learn that life goes on."

In an age when school shootings dominate headlines, Cameron says the spelling bee is a "much-needed feel-good" event. "It's a reassurance for many of us adults that in the middle of chaos, there exist ordinary families and decent people and hardworking kids in the world today."

With 20 national bees under his belt, Cameron says he doesn't think about stepping down from one of the country's most prestigious academic events. When pressed again, he points to a wall plaque in his office that reads "Old Spellers Never Die ... Dye? ... Dy? ..."  
Below the plaque lies a handwritten response "They just forget the letters ... leters ... ledders?"

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For media interviews, contact **Alex Cameron** before May 28 at (937) 229-3434 or via e-mail at [cameron@checkov.hm.udayton.edu](mailto:cameron@checkov.hm.udayton.edu). **Mary Brooks** can be reached before May 28 at (515) 225-2031. **Ned Andrews** can be reached before May 28 at (865) 435-1012. All three can be reached May 28-June 1 at the Grand Hyatt Hotel Washington at (202) 582-1234. For more information on this year's Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee, go to [www.spellingbee.com](http://www.spellingbee.com).